

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
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R 150907Z APR 77
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2687
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
DIA WASHDC
USCINCEUR
SECDEF

CONFIDENTIAL DAMASCUS 2419

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, SA, UR
SUBJECT: SAUDI PRESSURES COMPLICATE SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS

1. SUMMARY. LOCAL SOURCES CLAIM SAUDI SUSPICIONS THAT SYRIA NOT IMPLEMENTING AGREED ANTI-SOVIET POLICY LINE PARTIALLY ACCOUNT FOR HALT IN SAUDI ASSISTANCE TO DAMASCUS.

THIS APPARENTLY HAS COMPLICATED SYRIAN EFFORTS TO NEGOTIATE NEW MILITARY AND ECONOMIC AGREEMENTS WITH MOSCOW DURING UPCOMING APRIL 18 VISIT BY ASAD. SYRIA NEEDS BOTH FAVORABLE TERMS IN THESE AREAS FROM SOVIETS AND REOPENING OF SAUDI FINANCIAL PIPELINE. SARG LEADERSHIP'S RESPONSE SEEMS TO BE TO PORTRAY RECENT INTERNAL DECISIONS
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AS ANTI-SOVIET MEASURES. END SUMMARY.

2. UPCOMING APRIL 18 VISIT OF SYRIAN DELEGATION LED BY PRES. ASAD TO MOSCOW HAS BEEN COMPLICATED BY SAUDI FINANCIAL PRESSURES, ACCORDING TO STORIES WE HEAR LOCALLY. LOCAL AP STRINGER TOLD US OF HIS CONVERSATION WITH SARG MINISTER IN WHICH LATTER SAID SAUDI AID TO

SYRIA AGREED TO AT RIYADH AND CAIRO RECONCILIATION SUMMITS HAD BEEN CONDITIONED ON SARG WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW GENERAL ANTI-SOVIET POLICY LINE. HOWEVER, SAUDI SUSPICIONS THAT SYRIA NOT LIVING UP TO AGREEMENT SWELLED WHEN IN JANUARY SAG LEARNED OF ASAD'S INTENDED VISIT TO MOSCOW. SAUDIS DETERMINED TO WITHHOLD FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO SYRIA TO PRESSURE SARG INTO UNHOLDING TERMS OF AGREEMENT.

3. MFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR SHOUIFI RECENTLY MADE SOMEWHAT SAME POINT IN REVERSE. HE CLAIMED THAT SOME RECENT SARG ACTIONS COULD BE INTERPRETED AS LOCAL RESPONSE TO SAUDI PRESSURES. FIRST, CITING NEW SOCIAL REGULATIONS REPORTED DAMASCUS 2355 (NOTAL), SHOUIFI SAID HE BELIEVED REGIME PORTRAYING THEM TO SAG AS ATTEMPT TO ENFORCE MORE CONSERVATIVE LIFESTYLE CLOSER TO DOMESTIC SAUDI SOCIAL CUSTOMS. SECOND, SHOUIFI SAID THAT AUTHORITIES HAVE RECENTLY IMPOSED NEW CONTROLS ON IMPORTS OF SOVIET PUBLICATIONS. SHOUIFI ADDED THAT IN MEETING WITH PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL FRONT LEADERS, ASAD ALSO CRITICIZED SOVIET UNION IN PRESENCE OF SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY REPS. IN SHOUIFI'S VIEW, THESE ACTIONS MARKED ATTEMPT BY ASAD TO PLACATE SAUDIS PRIOR TO HIS MOSCOW TRIP.

4. SOURCE MENTIONED PARA TWO TOLD US HE AWARE THAT SARG HAS RECENTLY IMPOSED FORM OF CENSORSHIP AFFECTING IN-COMING SOVIET PUBLICATIONS, BUT HAS NOT BANNED THEIR IMPORTATION. HE SAID REGIME HAS SOME CONCERN AT SOVET SUCCESSES IN DISTRIBUTING THEIR MATERIALS THROUGH LOCAL CONFIDENTIAL

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BOOKSTORES. OVER PAST FEW YEARS, SOVIETS HAVE MANAGED TO INDUCE OWNERS OF MANY BOOKSTORES TO STOCK SOVIET PUBLICATIONS BY OFFERING EASY CREDIT TERMS AND PAYING THEM MONTHLY FEE FOR STORAGE OF MATERIAL WHICH IN EFFECT AMOUNTS TO SUBSIDY. SOURCE MENTIONED THAT REGIME HAS BEEN TRYING TO CONSTRICT SOVIET CULTURAL INROADS. FOR SEVERAL MONTHS, AND IS NOW FOCUSING ON PUBLICATIONS.

5. COMMENT: SYRIA'S DIFFICULT FINANCIAL SITUATION AND STATUS OF ME ISSUES COMPEL IT TO ATTEMPT NEGOTIATE BILATERAL MILITARY AND ECONOMIC AGREEMENTS WITH THE SOVIETS WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY MOLLIFYING SAUDI CONCERN THAT DAMASCUS REGIME NOT UNDER MOSCOW'S INFLUENCE. IT SEEMS LOGICAL THAT SAUDI SUSPICIONS ABOUT NATURE OF SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONSHIP HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO APPARENT HALTING OF SAUDI AID FUNDS TO SYRIA. IF OUR SOURCES ARE ACCURATE, REGIME HAS FOUND WAY TO IMPLEMENT INTERNAL POLICIES IN RESPONSE TO LOCAL CONDITIONS THAT WILL ALSO FIND FAVORABLE RECEPTION IN RIYADH.

IMPOSITION OF CONTROLS ON INCOMING SOVIET PUBLICATIONS
IS LATEST IN SERIES OF RESTRICTIONS AFFECTING SOVIET
CULTURAL ACTIVITIES THAT ALSO INCLUDE DIMINISHMENT OF
SOVIET PROGRAMS ON DAMASCUS TELEVISION AND HALT IN
ACCEPTANCE OF SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SYRIAN STUDENTS TO
STUDY IN SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES.
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